

University of Virginia, The Crackerbox  
East Range Drive  
University of Virginia  
Charlottesville  
Virginia

HABS No. VA-193-I

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Historic American Buildings Survey  
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA, THE CRACKERBOX HABS No. VA-193-I

Location: East Range Drive (termination of drive),  
University of Virginia, Charlottesville,  
Virginia.

Present Owner: The Board of Visitors of the University of  
Virginia.

Present Occupant: Robert Kolvoord, Nicholas Lailas, William  
Weisberg, and Rudolph Beverly.

Present Use: Student Housing.

Significance: The Crackerbox is the smallest dormitory on the  
University of Virginia campus. Part of the  
historic Lawn and Ranges, it adds an odd note of  
asymmetry to Jefferson's carefully conceived  
plan. Thought to have originally been used as a  
kitchen, the Crackerbox boasts two fireplaces.  
The first floor fireplace is the largest one at  
the University. In 1960 the Crackerbox was  
totally renovated to meet the needs of its  
present use. It now houses four students.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: The Crackerbox was built circa 1840. (Local tradition; University of Virginia files, Alderman Library)
2. Architects: Not known. The Lawn and Ranges were designed by Thomas Jefferson, but the Crackerbox never appears in Jefferson's plans.
3. Original and subsequent owners: The Crackerbox has always been owned by the Board of Visitors of the University of Virginia.
4. Builder: Unknown.
5. Original plans and construction: No original drawings or plans have been located. Notes and letters indicate that there was a brick floor in the first floor room.

6. Alterations and additions: In 1960 the Crackerbox was converted into a student dormitory. (See Appendix 9-12 for drawings concerning renovation.) Chester Titus, Director of University Housing, was responsible for the conversion. Fred Nichols, Professor of Architecture at the University, conducted the renovation. The bricks used in the renovation were taken from old Charlottesville buildings which were being demolished.

B. Historical Context:

Written history concerning the Crackerbox begins circa 1840.

A "Buck Coles's" mother was born there at this time. His grandmother also lived in the Crackerbox. (Loose manila cards, University of Virginia Files: Crackerbox.) There are numerous stories and legends involving the history of the Crackerbox.

It is believed that the Crackerbox was once a summer kitchen. Its original brick floor, barn type door, and large fireplace on the ground level, with a single room above, perhaps for a cook, suggest this use.

Some believe that the Crackerbox was one of a number of buildings comprising Hotel F. (Note to Mrs. Talley 9/30/62 in UVA Files: Crackerbox, in Alderman Library.)

Another story "asserts that Mr. Jefferson, wishing to keep the students away from the lower class establishments in town, established a University 'bordello' in the building." (Cavalier Daily, Feb. 13, 1974.) Another source mentions the Crackerbox as "having a reputation" years ago. (Note in UVA File: Crackerbox, dated 10/1/62.)

The Crackerbox was unoccupied for several years. It was used as a garage for a while, and then fell into disrepair. Professor Bice of the University describes it as a "pile of rubble" before its renovation in 1960. Since its opening, in the second semester of 1961, the Crackerbox has been used for student housing.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement

1. Architectural character: The Crackerbox is an odd little structure in the midst of Jefferson's Lawn and Ranges. It stands in opposition to the symmetry of Jefferson's carefully conceived plan. The simplicity and plainness of this two-story building are accentuated by the size and formality of the buildings which surround it. The corbelled chimney and walls of the Crackerbox are its only form of embellishment. The little Crackerbox does, however, boast the largest fireplace on the campus.

2. Condition of the fabric: The exterior brick masonry is sound, as is the roof and chimney. The wood stoop and stairs are also in good condition, though some rot is beginning to show. The interiors have been well maintained.

B. Description of Exterior

1. Overall dimensions: The two-story house is ~~house is~~ 18' 2" wide by 18' 11" long.
2. Foundation: The foundation for the building is not visible. The rear wall of the Crackerbox is flanked on either side by a stone retaining wall. The slope of the ground is such that the west wall of the Crackerbox is only 12' high. On the first floor interior, this wall lies approximately 4' below ground level.
3. Wall construction: Walls are of dark red brick. The majority of bricks are laid in 5-course American bond. On the first floor, exterior walls are 12" thick. On the second floor, east and west walls are only 8" thick. The north and south walls remain 12" thick.
4. Structural system: The four exterior walls are load-bearing.
5. Porches: A wooden stairway, 3'1" wide X 9' long, leads up to a 4'1" X 3'2" stoop outside the entrance to the second floor.
6. Chimneys: The chimney of the Crackerbox is the most decorative element of the building. At its base the chimney measures 12'8" X 2'6". The chimney corbels inward many times, in a highly asymmetrical pattern, becoming smaller in both length and width. The chimney rises nearly 5' above the roof ridge.
7. Openings
  - a. Doorways and doors: The doorway and door on the first and second floor are the same. The doors are recessed 10" from the exterior wall. They are constructed like barn doors, and measure 3' X 6'6".
  - b. Roof: The roof is covered in metal. Below the roof along the east and west wall there is a cornice of 3 corbelled rows of brick.

C. Description of Interior

1. Floor plans

a. First floor: The first floor is comprised of only one room. The entrance leads directly into it.

b. Second floor: The second floor is also only one room, with the entryway leading right into it.

2. Stairways: There are no interior stairways. The only access to the second floor is the exterior stair.

3. Flooring: The original flooring on the first floor was brick. The flooring is now 9" X 9" linoleum tiles. On the second floor, the flooring is 3" strips of dark wood.

4. Wall and ceiling finish: Walls and ceilings are plastered and painted white. The north wall on the first floor is brick up to 4'2", where the plaster juts out an inch, and continues to the ceiling. Large, dark stained wooden wardrobes have been built into the rooms on the south wall of both the first and second floor. One wash basin is built into the wardrobes on each floor.

5. Fireplaces: The first floor fireplace has 3 openings. One is very large, 4'6" X 3'6", with a shallow jack arch. Of the other two openings, the lower one also has a jack arch, while the upper opening has a heavy metal door inside it. This door is recessed 9½" from the front of the fireplace. The second floor fireplace is smaller, only 3' X 2'6". There is no brick exposed on the face of this fireplace. A black stone, or cementlike mixture, covers the surface area between the edge of the mantelpiece, and the opening of the fireplace.

6. Decorative features: Both floors have mop boards, ceiling molding, and picture molding around the perimeter of the room. On the first floor, there is no mop board along the fireplace wall, however. There is a mantel over the first floor fireplace, while a mantelpiece surrounds 3 sides of the second floor fireplace.

7. Lighting fixtures: There is one overhead lighting fixture in the middle of the ceiling on each floor.

8. Heating: Both floors are heated by radiators. There is one on the first floor, and two on the second. Both fireplaces work.

UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA, THE CRACKERBOX (HABS No. VA-193-I)  
(page 5)

D. Site:

The Crackerbox is located between Levering Hall and the garden to Pavilion X. A small brick courtyard covers the ground in front of the building. Three feet behind the west wall of the Crackerbox, the high brick wall of Pavilion X's garden rises.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

- A. Architectural Drawings: 1960 renovation drawings of the Crackerbox by Fred Nichols. Located at the Department of Buildings and Grounds, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia.
- B. Early Views: Photographs after renovations. Black and white photos and negatives by David Skinner. See Files # 2138, 2139. Located in the Manuscripts Room, Alderman Library, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia. Illustrated newspaper articles in University of Virginia Files: Crackerbox; Lawn; Range. Found in Reference Room, Alderman Library, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia.
- C. Interviews: Interview by phone with Professor Bice, 5/24/83, who teaches a course on the history of the University of Virginia; University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia.
- D. Bibliography
1. The University of Virginia Files, in the Reference Room of Alderman Library, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia. Look under Crackerbox, Lawn, Ranges, and Housing. Newspaper articles under Crackerbox.
  2. Adams, Herbert B., Thomas Jefferson and the University of Virginia. Government Printing Office: Washington, 1888.
- E. Library Sources Not Yet Investigated: University of Virginia Alumni News, Dec.-Jan. 1963, p.10. This should contain an illustrated article. It was mentioned briefly in one of the University of Virginia Files.

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PART IV: PROJECT INFORMATION

This documentation was produced by the School of Architecture at the University of Virginia under the direction of K. Edward Lay, Professor of Architecture, during the Spring Semester 1983. The material was prepared by Debra L. Lord, Graduate Student in Architectural History. The documentation was donated to the Historic American Buildings Survey. It was not produced under HABS supervision, nor edited by members of the HABS staff. Additional material on the Crackerbox may be found in the Field Records accompanying this report.